

# Chapter 16

## The Council of Trent and Catholic Reformation

(1563)

### *Acts of the Council of Trent*

#### Introduction

As the Protestant challenge to Catholicism progressed successfully into the 1540s, calls for a general council to address the question of church reform and to develop strategies to meet the Protestant threat grew louder, especially from Emperor Charles V (r. 1519-1556). Under duress, Pope Paul III (r. 1534-1549) opened the first session of the Council of Trent in 1545. Paul recognized the need for reform but resented imperial pressure to call for a council that might rival papal authority within the church. The Council of Trent met sporadically over the next three decades in three sessions (1545-1547, 1551-1552, 1562-1563) broken up by political infighting, papal deaths, and outbreaks of plague. If disjointed, the council nevertheless resulted in a spectacular resurgence for Catholicism and, with the parallel development of the Jesuit order, capped a period of retrenchment and renewal known as the Catholic Reformation.

At Trent, Catholic leaders rejected all attempts to compromise with Protestantism and retained the basic positions of the Roman Church, including the Latin Mass, the veneration of saints, the cult of the Virgin Mary, and the notion that salvation required both faith and good works. They defended Catholic theology and emphasized reforms, ordering an end to abuses of power and corruption within the clergy and establishing seminaries to educate priests. Finally, the council came out strongly in support of papal power, strengthening the authority of the papacy. In short, the Catholic Reformation, and especially the Council of Trent, stopped the momentum of the Protestant Reformation and set the stage for an escalation of religious warfare throughout Europe. Catholics began to regain large parts of the continent, and by 1650 at least half of all Protestants had reconverted.

#### Questions to Consider

- In what ways do these decrees illustrate the desire for reform within the Catholic Church?
- How did the acts in this document put the Catholic Church in a better position to combat Protestantism?

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The universal Church has always understood that the complete confession of sins was instituted by the Lord, and is of divine right necessary for all who have fallen into sin after baptism; because our Lord Jesus Christ, when about to ascend from earth to heaven, left priests, his own vicars, as leaders and judges, before whom all the mortal offenses into which the faithful of Christ may have fallen should be carried, in order that, in accordance with the power of the keys, they may pronounce the sentence of forgiveness or of retention of sins. For it is manifest that priests could not have exercised this judgment without knowledge of the case....

1 This holy Council enjoins on all bishops and others who are charged with teaching, that  
2 they instruct the faithful diligently concerning the intercession and invocation of saints, the honor  
3 paid to relics, and the legitimate use of images. Let them teach that the saints, who reign together  
4 with Christ, offer up their own prayers to God for men; that it is good and useful suppliantly to  
5 invoke them, and to have recourse to their prayers and aid in obtaining benefits from God,  
6 through his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who is our sole Redeemer and Saviour; and that those  
7 persons think impiously who deny that the saints, who enjoy eternal happiness in heaven, are to  
8 be invoked; or who assert that the saints do not pray for men, or that the invocation of them to  
9 pray for each of us individually is idolatry; or who declare that it is repugnant to the word of  
10 God, and opposed to the honor of the "one mediator of God and men, Christ Jesus," or that it is  
11 foolish to supplicate, orally or mentally, those who reign in heaven....

12  
13 If any one saith that the New Testament does not provide for a distinct, visible  
14 priesthood; or that this priesthood has not any power of consecrating and offering up the true  
15 body and blood of the Lord, and of forgiving and retaining sins, but is only an office and bare  
16 ministry of preaching the gospel; or that those who do not preach are not priests at all; let him be  
17 anathema....

18  
19 If any one saith that by sacred ordination the Holy Ghost is not given, and that vainly  
20 therefore do the bishops say, "Receive ye the Holy Ghost"; or that a character is not imprinted by  
21 that ordination; or that he who has once been a priest can again become a layman; let him be  
22 anathema....

23  
24 If any one saith that in the Catholic Church there is not a hierarchy instituted by divine  
25 ordination, consisting of bishops, priests, and ministers; let him be anathema.

26  
27 If any one saith that the sacraments of the new law were not all instituted by Jesus Christ,  
28 our Lord; or that they are more or less than seven, to wit, baptism, confirmation, the eucharist,  
29 penance, extreme unction, orders, and matrimony; or even that any one of these seven is not truly  
30 and properly a sacrament; let him be anathema....

31  
32 In order that the faithful may approach and receive the sacraments with greater reverence  
33 and devotion of mind, this Holy Council enjoins on all bishops that, not only when they are  
34 themselves about to administer them to the people they shall first explain, in a manner suited to  
35 the capacity of those who receive them, the efficacy and use of those sacraments, but they shall  
36 endeavor that the same be done piously and prudently by every parish priest; and this even in the  
37 vernacular tongue, if need be, and if it can be conveniently done.

38  
39 Such instruction shall be given in accordance with the form which will be prescribed for  
40 each of the sacraments by this holy Council in a catechism, which the bishops shall take care to  
41 have faithfully translated into the vulgar tongue, and to have expounded to the people by all  
42 parish priests. They shall also explain in the said vulgar tongue, during the solemnization of  
43 mass, or the celebration of the divine offices, on all festivals or solemnities, the sacred oracles  
44 and the maxims of salvation; and, setting aside all unprofitable questions, they shall endeavor to  
45 impress them on the hearts of all, and to instruct their hearers in the law of the Lord....

1           It is to be desired that those who undertake the office of bishop should understand what  
2 their portion is, and comprehend that they are called, not to their own convenience, not to riches  
3 or luxury, but to labors and cares, for the glory of God. For it is not to be doubted that the rest of  
4 the faithful also will be more easily excited to religion and innocence if they shall see those who  
5 are set over them not fixing their thoughts on the things of this world, but on the salvation of  
6 souls and on their heavenly country. Wherefore this holy Council, being minded that these things  
7 are of the greatest importance towards restoring ecclesiastical discipline, admonishes all bishops  
8 that, often mediating thereon, they show themselves conformable to their office by their actual  
9 deeds and the actions of their lives; which is a kind of perpetual sermon; but, above all, that they  
10 so order their whole conversation that others may thence be able to derive examples of frugality,  
11 modesty, continency, and of that holy humility which so much commends us to God.  
12

13           Wherefore, after the example of our fathers in the Council of Carthage, this Council not  
14 only orders that bishops be content with modest furniture, and a frugal table and diet, but that  
15 they also give heed that in the rest of their manner of living, and in their whole house, there be  
16 nothing seen which is alien to this holy institution, and which does not manifest simplicity, zeal  
17 toward God, and a contempt of vanities.  
18

19           It strictly forbids them, moreover, to strive to enrich their own kindred or domestics out  
20 of the revenues of the Church; seeing that even the canons of the apostles forbid them to give to  
21 their kindred the property of the Church, which belongs to God; but if their kindred be poor, let  
22 them distribute to them thereof as poor, but not misapply or waste the Church's goods for their  
23 sakes: yea, this holy Council, with the utmost earnestness, admonishes them completely to lay  
24 aside all this human and carnal affection towards brothers, nephews, and kindred, which is the  
25 seed plot of many evils in the Church. And what has been said of bishops, the same is to be  
26 observed by all who hold ecclesiastical benefices, whether secular or regular, each according to  
27 the nature of his rank....